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Caring for children in Europe

How childcare, parental leave and flexible working arrangements interact in Europe

Barbara Janta

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Prepared for the European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

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Preface

This policy brief was developed by RAND Europe, which in 2011 was appointed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion to provide content and technical support for the European Alliance for Families platform, which became the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) in 2013.

The European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) was set up to explore demographic and economic challenges in the EU from a child and family-focused perspective. Its purpose is to share the best of policymaking for children and their families, and to foster cooperation and mutual learning in the field. This is achieved through information provided on the EPIC website, which enables policymakers from the Member States to search evidence-based child-focused practices from around the EU and to share knowledge about practices that are being developed, and also by bringing together government, civil society and European Union representatives for seminars and workshops to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

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The document is designed to provide insights into issues of interest to policymakers. It has been reviewed by one of the EPIC external experts in child and family policy, and internally, following RAND's quality assurance processes.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.

Caring for children in Europe: how childcare, parental leave and flexible working arrangements interact in Europe

Executive summary

- This brief examines how paid work and the care of children are reconciled by families in European Union Member States. It analyses how childcare, parental leave and working time instruments are combined and used in a complementary way.
- Most parents combine various reconciliation instruments. Particular childcare arrangements are related to parents' preferences and norms, a child's age, and labour market opportunities for parents. Our research shows that high participation rates in formal childcare settings are not a prerequisite for high levels of female labour force participation. However, formal childcare has positive consequences for children, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas lack of or limited formal childcare options can have negative consequences for female career development.
- Since parents prefer flexibility in reconciliation, the state should ensure that all parents have access to suitable childcare provision and are supported in their labour force participation.

Introduction

The aim of this brief is to shed light on the complex and multi-layered aspects of reconciliation of paid work and care for children, a much-debated issue in many European countries, and to inform policy- and decisionmakers across the EU about current childcare trends and policy developments. European strategies, such as the Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 and Barcelona Summit targets, set various targets and objectives regarding childcare and labour force participation rates and these, in turn, shape policy development. As summarised by Saraceno, they have 'formulated a kind of narrative model both for mothers' behaviour and for childcare' (2011, 79). She continues that 'mothers are increasingly expected to participate in the labour market; fathers are increasingly expected to be involved in the care of very young children; children are increasingly expected to be partly cared for in non-family formal settings from a very young age onwards.'

For many families childcare is no longer a simplistic choice between care provided by a family member (usually the mother) and non-family care. Increasingly, childcare involves multiple dimensions and actors. This partly results from the fact that childcare packages offered in EU countries combine various elements of labour market and parental leave policies, as well as a broad range of childcare settings. Childcare can be delivered through formal childcare settings, such as nurseries, preschools or registered child minders, or informal childcare arrangements, most often provided by grandparents, other relatives, or unregistered nannies and child minders. Although not a childcare arrangement per se, maternity, paternity and parental leave arrangements can also form a potential way for parents to organise care for children. Similarly, flexibility in the labour market, with opportunities to work part-time, flexible or atypical hours, can also help parents with childcare provision. The combination of these options creates opportunities for parents and different possible experiences for children. Childcare arrangements are also influenced by individual preferences, normative values and attitudes towards care.

This brief examines these various options and discusses how childcare is organised across Europe. We first discuss formal and informal childcare arrangements, followed by a brief overview of parental leave schemes and labour market flexibility, as possible ways to combine work and employment. Finally, we discuss how all these elements work together helping parents to participate in the labour market and have their childcare needs met.

When feasible, we distinguish between childcare provision for very young children (under 3 years old) and preschool children (from 3 years old until compulsory school age). A broad overview of the situation in European countries is offered, based on a non-systematic review of predominantly English language literature, and when feasible, on the analysis of the European and national data sources. Our conclusions should be considered within these limitations.

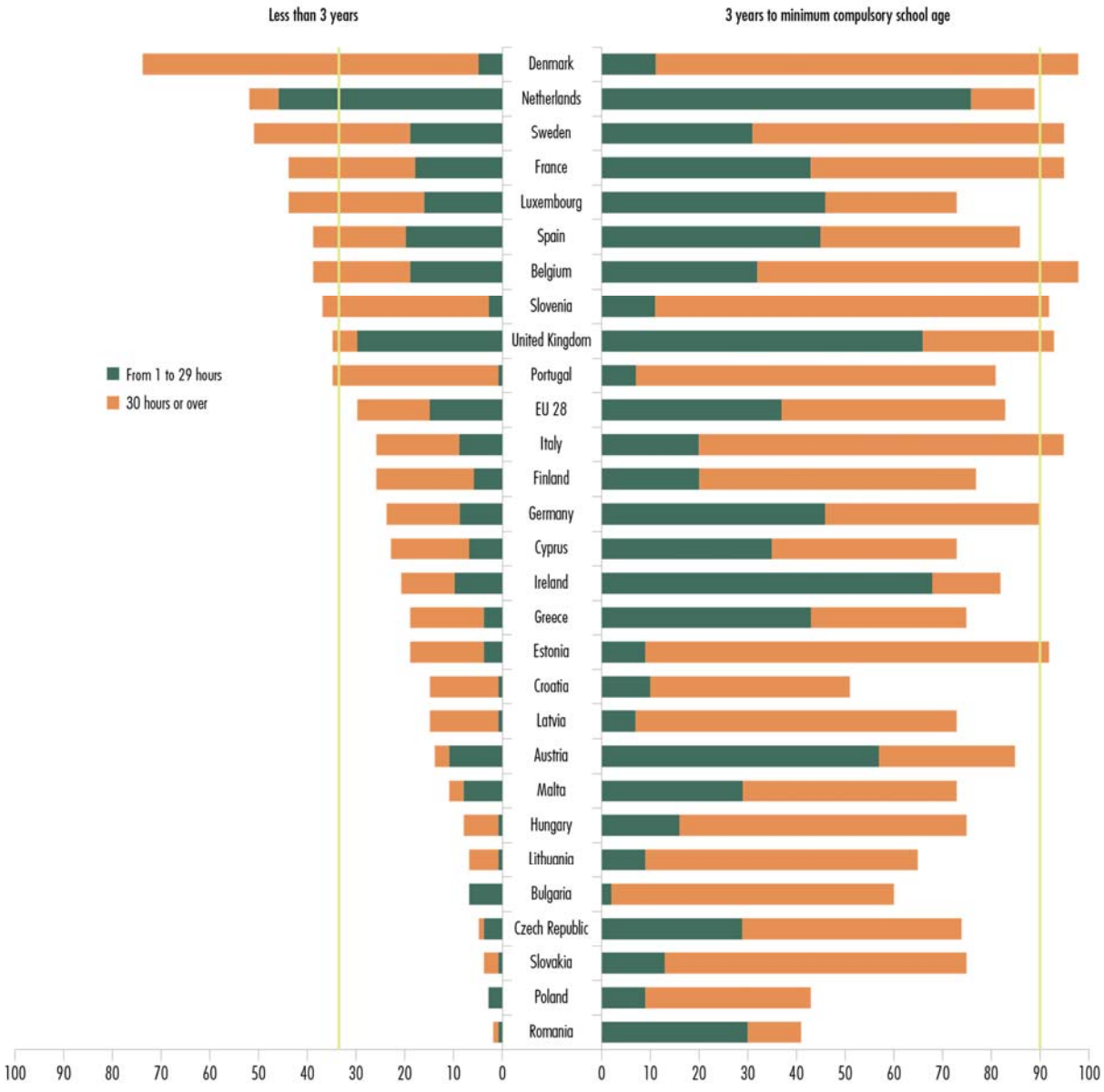
1. Typology of childcare services in Europe

1.1. Formal childcare services

Provision of good-quality formal childcare policies has been found to be vital for child development and well-being, and an essential step towards equal opportunities in employment between women and men (Esping-Andersen 2009). At the Barcelona Summit in 2002, the European Council set targets for providing childcare in EU Member States, specifying that at least 90 per cent of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and at least 33 per cent of children under 3 years of age, should have access to formal childcare provision. Yet, a decade after the targets were set, there are still large differences in childcare coverage across Member States, in particular for the younger age group (European Commission 2013b).

Looking at childcare provision for children under 3 years old in 2010, analysis by Mills et al. (2013) showed that the 33 per cent Barcelona target has already been met in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Belgium, Luxembourg and the UK. Nonetheless, the authors highlighted considerable cross-country variation regarding hours used. In some countries, such as Denmark, Poland, Estonia and Latvia, there is a predominantly full-time use (over 30 hours per week) of formal childcare provision, whereas in the Netherlands, the UK and the Czech Republic, parents mostly use childcare part-time (under 30 hours per week).

Figure 1: Percentage of children up to 3 years of age and from 3 years of age to mandatory school age cared for by formal arrangements (by weekly time spent in care, 2010)



Note 1: A number of data points are computed based on small samples and are not considered statistically reliable. These include for children up to three years of age: BG, CZ, IE, EL, CY, LT, MT, NL, AT, PL, RO, SK, FI, UK, CH, and HR for 30 hours or over; and BG, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, CY, LV, LT, HU, MT, AT, PL, PT, RO, SI, SK, FI, IS, NO and HR for 1 to 29 hours. For children from three years of age to mandatory school age these include: RO, FI and CH for 30 hours or over; and BG, DK, EE, LV, LT, MT, PT, SK, FI, IS and HR for 1 to 29 hours.
Note 2: Mandatory school age varies by country.
SOURCE: Based on Mills et al. (2013, 5).

Analysing services for children aged 3 to mandatory school age, Saraceno observed that there is wide coverage of services, indicating that for this age group 'some kind of formal, non-family care and education is framed as a normal experience and resource for growing up, irrespective of parents' working status' (2011, 81–82). Mills et al. (2013) show that the Barcelona target of 90 per cent of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age has been met or surpassed in 11 Member States,

namely Belgium, Spain, France, Sweden, Germany, Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Ireland, Denmark and the UK; they also show that in Estonia, Slovenia, Italy, Norway and Portugal, children mostly receive full-time care, with part-time care being a more popular option in the Netherlands, Ireland, the UK and Austria. This is consistent with an OECD study (2012) that demonstrated considerable variation in the intensity of childcare usage – finding, for instance, that children in Sweden typically attend childcare facilities for six hours a day, five days a week, whereas in the Netherlands it is more common for children to participate for only one or two days a week.

Box 1. Formal and informal childcare definitions

Formal childcare often encompasses education at preschool or compulsory school, childcare at centre-based services before or after school hours, and childcare at day care centres.

Informal childcare is typically characterised as unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation.

SOURCE: Adapted from Mills et al. (2013) and Rutter & Evans (2011).

Nevertheless, high participation rates in formal childcare do not necessarily 'provide a direct answer to the question of whether demand for childcare has been met' (Mills et al. 2013, 3). Mills et al. conclude that 'examining simple percentages can be misleading when considered in isolation since formal childcare arrangements may be of little assistance in allowing women with children to enter paid employment if they only cover a small number of hours per week.' There may be some incompatibility between full-time care and full-time work: full-time care is defined as usage of 30 hours or more per week, and as so it may not be compatible with a full-time job of 40 hours or more per week. As the Eurydice (2009) report points out, in most Member States childcare settings generally provide extensive opening hours that take account of the working parents' needs, but this provision is usually only provided for older children and often only part-time provision is subsidised.

Mills et al. (2013) also note that low coverage of formal childcare provision in certain countries does not necessary mean 'a shortage of childcare'; they argue that it can also indicate that parents use alternative strategies to care for young children, for instance extended parental leave options or informal care.

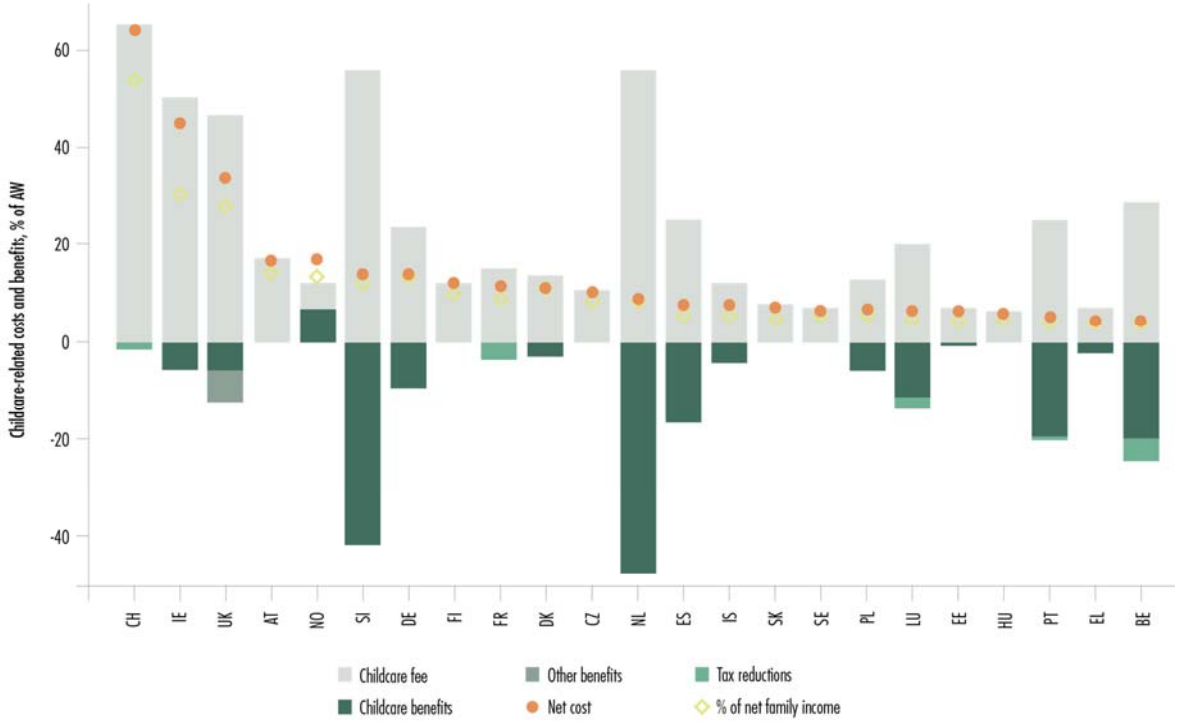
Box 2. Formal childcare reform in Germany

Introduced on 1 August 2013, childcare reform in Germany promotes a rights-based approach. Every child between the age of 1 and 3 has the legal right to early childhood support in a day care centre or day nursery. It is argued that the availability of day care for young children is one of the most important factors influencing people's decisions whether or not to have children. With a rapidly ageing society, the introduction of the legal right to childcare provision is seen as a measure that is aimed at contributing to long-term demographic change. Despite early childhood education and care ranking high on the political agenda in Germany, it is questionable whether it would be possible to provide high-quality childcare provision for every child as required by law.

SOURCE: Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen and Jugend (2013).

Availability of formal childcare provision is also one of the possible factors determining women's employment. Other factors, such as cultural and normative values about parenthood, may also influence the mothers of young children to participate in the labour market. Other aspects, such as affordability, flexibility and quality of childcare also impact on parents' decisions whether or not to enter and sustain employment. OECD analyses (2011) show that in most Member States childcare cost is high but is offset by similarly high childcare benefits. The situation in the UK and Ireland is different, with high childcare costs not compensated by subsidies and child-related benefits. As a result, the relatively low usage of full-time formal childcare in these two countries may be attributed to affordability. Overall, according to European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) 2011 data, 59 per cent of those trying to use childcare services in Europe reported cost as the main obstacle to access these services (Eurofound 2013).

Figure 2: Components of net childcare costs for a dual-earner family, 2008



Note: Where the partner earns the average wage (AW) and the female partner earns 50 per cent of the average wage.
SOURCE: Based on Mills et al. (2013, 16).

Mills et al.'s (2013) analysis indicates that the main reason for not working or working part-time related to childcare reported across the sexes in Member States is that childcare is too expensive, followed by a lack of services and then other reasons linked to childcare. Only a small proportion of parents indicated that concerns about the quality of services were the main obstacle for not working or working part-time. Overall, across the EU, 53 per cent of women reported that they do not work or work part-time due to childcare being too expensive, 25 per cent due to a lack of availability of childcare services and only 4 per cent due to childcare being of insufficient quality. Mills et al. (2013) also showed that with the exception of Denmark, Sweden, Slovenia and Germany, childcare usage is related to household income, with the richest income groups of parents more often using formal childcare arrangements.

1.2. Informal childcare

Despite a large increase in formal care provision over the past decade, informal childcare plays an important role in many Member States. Typically, informal childcare is provided by grandparents and other relatives, friends and neighbours, and unregistered child-minders, nannies and au pairs.[1] Parents' usage of informal childcare varies considerably, with some families using it sporadically while for others it forms a regular childcare arrangement for a high number of hours per week.

Box 3. Use of informal childcare

Parents use informal childcare in **four** main **ways**:

1. To **supplement formal care**, in particular when formal childcare is provided on a part-time basis.
2. As the **main type of childcare** for very young children and babies.
3. As **after-school and holiday provision** for school-aged children.
4. As **emergency cover or back up** when regular childcare arrangements break down or are insufficient.

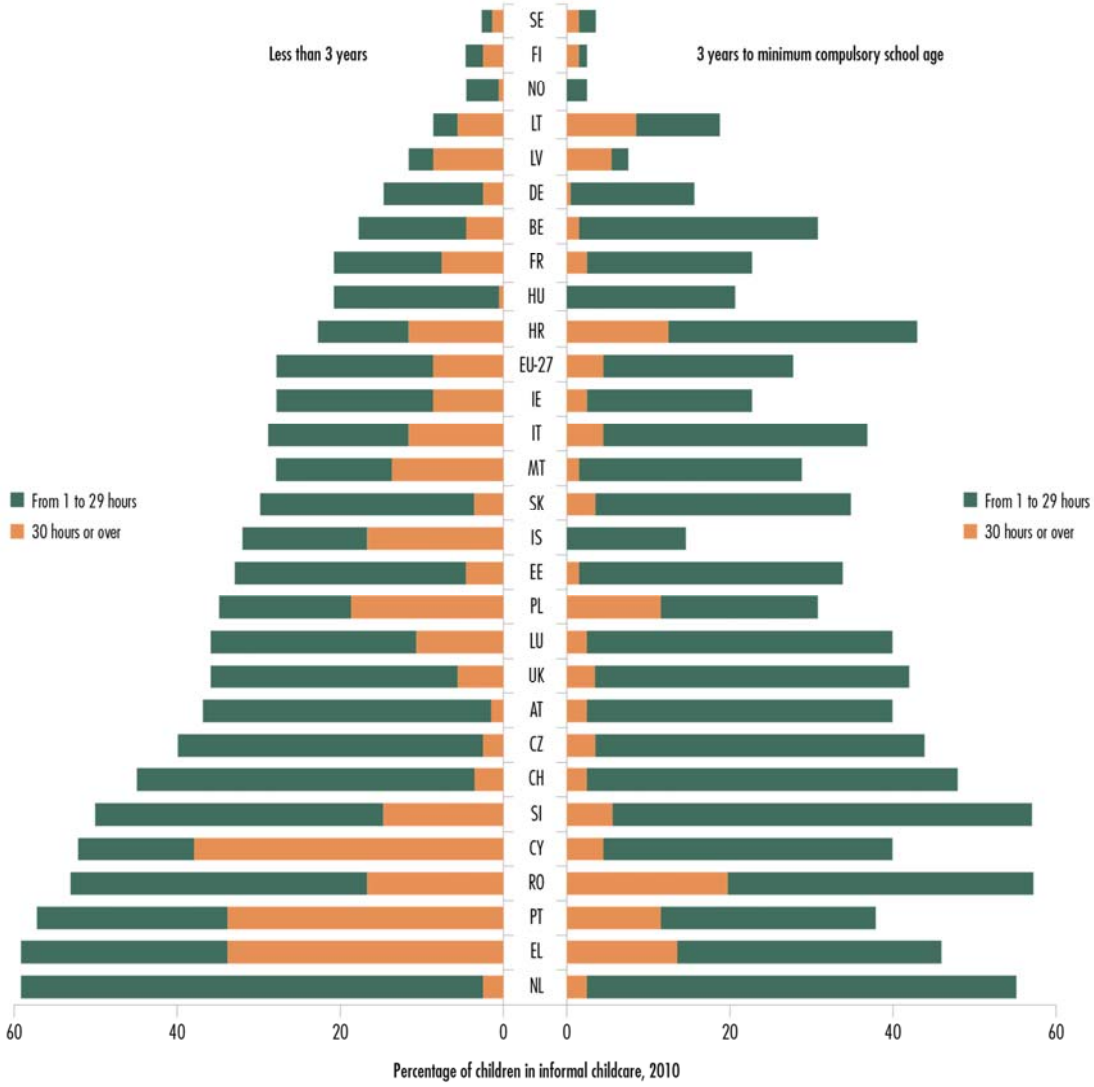
SOURCE: Rutter & Evans (2011)

Mills et al. (2013) have shown that more than half of children in the Netherlands, Greece, Portugal, Romania and Cyprus are cared for informally; in contrast, in countries such as Norway, Sweden and Finland, only a small proportion of children is cared for in an informal setting.

Overall, the use of informal childcare is quite high, and in about half of EU countries it surpasses the 33 per cent Barcelona target benchmark for children aged 0 to 3. Typically, informal childcare provision is used by parents on part-time basis (under 30 hours per week). Therefore, as summarised in Mills et al. (2013), it is questionable whether informal childcare can support women's full-time labour force participation.

[1] Some countries do not recognise childminders as formal childcare providers. As a consequence, the use of childminders counts towards informal childcare.

Figure 3: Percentage of children in informal childcare by age group, number of hours and country, 2010



Note: No 2010 data for Denmark and Bulgaria.

SOURCE: Based on Mills et al. (2013, 5).

Research has shown that across EU Member States, grandparents are the most common providers of informal childcare (Glaser et al. 2013; Jappens & Van Bavel 2012; Rutter & Evans 2011). The use of grandparents as carers results from two main factors: (1) the unavailability of formal childcare, and (2) normative values and attitudes towards childcare. For parents, in particular mothers, in many European countries with low investment in formal childcare services, the only possible way to enter the labour market is to have grandparents' help with childcare (Herlofson & Hagestad 2012). Yet, as shown by Aassve et al. (2012), there are differences across European countries when it comes to the care provided by grandparents. According to that study, grandparents' help with childcare had a significant influence on

mothers' decisions to enter the labour market in Bulgaria, France, Germany and Hungary, but not in Georgia, the Netherlands and Russia.

Previous studies show that grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to be engaged in childcare activities, particularly intensive childcare (see Igel & Szydlik 2011, Jappens & Van Bavel 2012 and Lewis et al. 2008 for a literature review on this subject). Regular childcare is mostly provided by grandparents who are younger and healthier, not economically active (retired or not employed), living close to their grandchildren and from the maternal side. Better-educated grandparents with higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be asked to provide childcare compared with grandparents with lower levels of education and lower socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, grandparents with fewer children and grandchildren are also more likely to engage in childcare. Lone parents, parents working long- or nonstandard hours and parents from financially disadvantaged families are most likely to use grandparent care. The age of children also influences the pattern of grandparents' care, with grandparents most likely to provide care for preschool children, except the very young children and toddlers. Glaser et al. (2013) provide figures on grandparents in the 'sandwich generation', who have at least one of their own parents still alive. According to that study, the highest proportions of grandparents in the sandwich generation are found in the Scandinavian countries and France, at around 22 per cent, and the lowest in Italy, at 12 per cent. Overall, in the 11 countries analysed, 17 per cent of grandparents are in the sandwich generation. Wellard (2012), analysing grandparents' care patterns in Britain, shows that 28 per cent[2] of grandparents are in the sandwich generation, and that 72 per cent of them provide care for grandchildren under the age of 16 and their own parents. Wellard also points out that the current cohort of grandparents is older than previous cohorts, and that this may have implications for the availability of grandparents to help with childcare. In addition, the EU policy focus on 'active ageing' and encouragement to remain in the labour market for longer also may have implications for grandparents' provision of care in the future (Glaser et al. 2013).

Jappens & Van Bavel (2012), in a study based on the analysis of the European Social Survey (ESS2) from 2004–2010, provide interesting observations regarding grandparents' childcare in Europe. The authors first examined the proportion of grandparents (respondents aged 55 or older) living together with at least one of their children. They found a clear difference between Northern and Western European countries, and Mediterranean and Central and Eastern European countries. In most Northern and Western European countries, co-residence with children was reported by less than 15 per cent of respondents. In contrast, co-residence between elderly parents and children in Southern, Central and Eastern European regions and Ireland was reported by 48 per cent or more of respondents. The authors conclude that this co-residence can influence support in everyday housework and care provision to and by older respondents.

Jappens & Van Bavel (2012) also analysed the percentage of exchanging support between older people and their children living separately. Similarly to their co-residence analysis, they found that the highest level of intergenerational support and care is in the Central and Eastern European counties, although with substantive differences within and between individual countries. Southern European countries (with the exception of Portugal) reported much lower levels of support and care in this category, often even lower than in Western and Northern European countries. The authors suggest that in the Mediterranean

[2] There is some inconsistency regarding the share of grandparents in the sandwich generation in the UK. Glaser et al. (2013) report that 15 per cent of grandparents in England are in the sandwich generation, but Wellard (2012) reports 28 per cent.

countries support and care are mainly provided by family members living together. They conclude that mothers in Italy, Greece, Hungary and parts of Spain and Austria are the most likely 'to mainly rely on grandparents as childcare providers' (2012, 108). In contrast, grandparents in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and France are least likely to provide this type of care. The authors also observe that differences in the patterns of care and reliance on grandparents differ at the country and regional level, with major regional differences in some countries.

Igel & Szydlik (2011) add to the discussion on grandparent childcare in Europe and provide interesting findings about the intensity of such care. The authors find that across European countries, 37 to 59 per cent of grandparents provide childcare, with most grandparents providing some care to their grandchildren in Northern and Western European countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, France and the Netherlands. However, grandparent involvement in the provision of childcare in Southern European countries was found to be much more intense. The authors conclude that public expenditure on childcare services, childcare infrastructure and maternity and paternal leave has a positive effect on the occurrence of grandparent care and a negative effect on intensity of childcare provision. Grandparents are more likely to provide intensive care if there are no alternative options or support provided by the state.

Similar findings about the frequency and intensity of grandparent care giving are reported by Glaser et al. (2013). Based on the analysis of the SHARE[3] data for 11 European countries, the authors report that over 40 per cent of grandparents provide childcare without the child's parents present. In Britain, 63 per cent of grandparents with a grandchild under 16 years old provide help with childcare.[4] Grandparents in France, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands are more likely to provide care than grandparents in Southern European countries. In Western and Scandinavian countries, around 50 to 60 per cent of grandparents provide care, compared with just 40 per cent in the Southern European counties. However, intensive and regular care is more prevalent in Southern Europe. For instance, in Italy 20 per cent of grandparents provide almost daily care, compared with just 2 per cent of grandparents in the Netherlands. In counties where parents are expected to work full-time and where formal childcare and generous support for mothers who stay at home is available, such as Sweden, Denmark and to a lesser extent France, grandparents are less engaged in providing intensive childcare but still provide occasional and less intensive care for their grandchildren. Glaser et al. conclude that in these countries, 'there is no assumption that grandparents will provide care' (2013, 11).

In contrast, in countries where state provision to parents is limited and there are few opportunities to work part-time, such as Portugal, Spain, Italy and Romania, there is greater reliance on intensive grandparent care. For instance, research by Blome et al. (2009) has shown the importance of the extended family network in Italy, concluding that although women's overall labour force participation is lower than the EU average, over half of all mothers of small children work, mostly full-time. This is feasible due to help received from family, together with a growing formal care market. Similar findings on the importance of grandparents' help with childcare arrangements in Portugal are provided by Lewis et al. (2008, 34), who observe that it is possible to have relatively high female full-time employment, even without 'equivalently high provision of child-care'. Yet, as the authors conclude, 'the very high proportion

[3] Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) studies include: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

[4] Based on British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey data.

of Portuguese women wanting more formal child-care provision indicates that this situation is hardly popular'. These counties have been characterised by Glaser et al. as countries where 'there is an assumption that grandparents will provide care' (2013, 11).

According to Glaser et al. (2013), a third cluster of grandparents' childcare arrangements is represented by the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. In these countries, female part-time working is combined with childcare coverage provided by the market rather than by the state. Also, a smaller proportion of mothers work long hours and thus do not need intensive childcare. As a result, in these counties 'grandparents have a middling role in both intensive childcare and occasional / less intensive care' (2013, 11).

Table 1. Percentages of grandmothers providing care for grandchildren

	Percentage of grandmothers providing **any care** for grandchildren	Percentage of grandmothers providing **intensive care** for grandchildren
Sweden	51	2
Netherlands	57	2
Denmark	59	2
France	51	7
Germany	40	8
UK	63[a]	8[b]
Hungary	56[c]	13[c]
Portugal	-	14[d]
Spain	42	17
Italy	42	22
Romania	93[c]	30[c]

Note: Data from SHARE, BSAS[a], ELSA[b] (England), GGS[c] (Romania, Hungary), ESS[d] (Portugal). BSAS figure is for grandparents with grandchildren under 16.

SOURCE: Glaser et al. (2013, 8).

Literature on other forms of informal care is much more limited. Rutter & Evans (2011) provide some findings for use of this type of service in the United Kingdom, reporting that about 1.8 per cent of the respondents in the first sweep of the Millennium Cohort Study[5] in 2000–2001 were using unregistered child minders, a similar share to those using nannies. Other unregistered care is provided by older siblings, friends, neighbours and au pairs. Mills et al. (2013) show that the role of childminders in caring for children in both age groups (under 3 years old and from 3 years old to mandatory school age) is rather limited in EU Member States. Childminders play a vital role only in Romania where, virtually every child is cared for in this way. However, childminders do not have a formal childcare status, resulting in the low rate of formal childcare use in Romania. In the Netherlands and Portugal, childminders care for a minority of children (around 10 per cent), but they do not play a significant role in any other Member State.

[5] The Millennium Cohort Study is a multi-disciplinary research project following the lives of around 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000–2001.

Informal childcare can play a vital role in enabling families, in particular women, to enter or remain in the labour market. It can also have positive socio-economic impacts, since it can facilitate intergenerational relationships, build social capital and provide support for parents. However, children solely receiving informal care can be less school-ready compared with counterparts receiving formal care, and can potentially be in an unsafe situation if cared for by inexperienced or socially disadvantaged carers (Rutter & Evans 2011).

2. Work and leave arrangements in Europe

2.1. Leave entitlement for parents of young children

Parental leave provides opportunities for parents of very young children to organise childcare. Length, compensation level and share of leave between parents vary considerably among EU Member States. Leave policies take three forms: maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave.

Box 4. Definitions of leave entitlement for parents of young children

Maternity leave is usually understood as a health and welfare measure, intended to protect the health of the mother and newborn child, to be taken just before, during and immediately after childbirth.

Paternity leave is usually taken soon after the birth of a child, and is intended to enable a father to spend time with his partner, new child and older children.

Parental leave is available to both parents. It is generally understood to be a care measure intended to give parents the opportunity to spend time caring for a young child. It usually can only be taken after the end of maternity leave. Parental leave can be either: (1) a non-transferable individual right (i.e. both parents have an entitlement to an equal amount of leave), or (2) an individual right that can be transferred to the other parent, or (3) a family right that parents can divide between themselves as they choose. In some countries parental leave consists only of non-transferable individual entitlements; in other countries it is a family right; while in other countries part of parental leave is an individual right and the remainder is a family right.

SOURCE: Based on Moss (2013).

All EU Member States provide maternity leave provision that covers the period after childbirth. The length of maternity leave ranges from 1.8 months in Germany and Austria to 12 months in Poland and the UK (Moss 2013). Organisation of paternity leave also varies considerably between Member States. Apart from the Scandinavian countries, Slovenia and Germany, paternity leave usually does not exceed 2 weeks.

Parents of young children are also entitled to parental leave. Despite the fact that parental leave is available to both parents, mothers are still the main users of leave entitlements. Moss (2011) shows that less than 3 per cent of fathers take parental leave in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland and Poland. On the other hand, as discussed in Miani & Hoorens (2013), nearly all mothers in Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany took parental leave of at least one month in 2010. Robila (2010) reports that in countries with the longest parental leave provision, leave is seen as a replacement for subsidised childcare. For instance, in the Czech Republic, women are provided with 28

weeks of maternity leave compensated at a replacement level of 69 per cent of their salary and up to 4 years of parental leave. Similarly, in Hungary, parental leave is up to 2 years. Robila argues that such long parental leave is to compensate for the limited provision of subsidised childcare.

Parental leave uptake largely depends on the leave's compensation level. Research shows that when parental leave is unpaid, the take-up is low by both mothers and fathers. For instance, in Spain in 2011, parental leave uptake corresponded to 7.2 per cent of births in that year. In the UK, only 11 per cent of parents of children under the age of 6 reported taking parental leave in 2012 (Moss 2013). In contrast, when the compensation level is high, fathers' use is higher, yet still lower than mothers' use. For instance, in Denmark among children born in 2005, 24 per cent of fathers took parental leave compared with 94 per cent of mothers. On average, fathers took 8 weeks and mothers 28 weeks. Similarly, in Sweden in 2011, 44 per cent of parental leave recipients were men compared to 56 per cent of women; on average, mothers took leave of 95 days and fathers 37 days (Moss 2013).

In order to increase the uptake of parental leave among fathers, many countries have introduced father's quotas, or in other words part of the leave is reserved for fathers. For instance, a 2007 reform in Germany, which had an explicit aim to raise uptake by fathers, has had the desired effect. The proportion of fathers taking leave increased from 3.3 per cent in 2006 to 27.8 per cent in 2011. Despite this substantial increase in leave uptake, 82.5 per cent of fathers took no more than their individual two-month entitlement in 2012 (Moss 2013). In Portugal, the proportion of fathers taking parental leave increased from 10.1 per cent in 2009 to nearly 23 per cent in 2011 (OECD 2012).

Saraceno (2011) reports that in some European countries, such as Finland, Norway, Belgium, Austria, Greece and (from the second child onwards) France, at the end of a parental leave period parents are given the option to receive a childcare allowance. This allows parents of young children to stay at home to care for their own child or to use non-family childcare. The allowance is provided usually at a flat rate and is much lower than the average wage. Saraceno argues that this approach can be seen as 'strengthening mothers' role as the main carer', strengthening social class differences and the informal care market (the allowance may be used to pay for informal care). A similar approach was introduced in Germany in 2013. Parents who decide not to put their child in a day care facility, regardless of their employment status, can receive €150 per child aged 15 to 36 months. The government justified this measure as a way of guaranteeing freedom of choice for parents who do not want to have their children in formal childcare. Others argue that this money would be better spent on more childcare places, and that the subsidy sends the wrong signal to parents about the family roles, discouraging mothers in particular from returning to the labour market (Ball & Reich 2012).

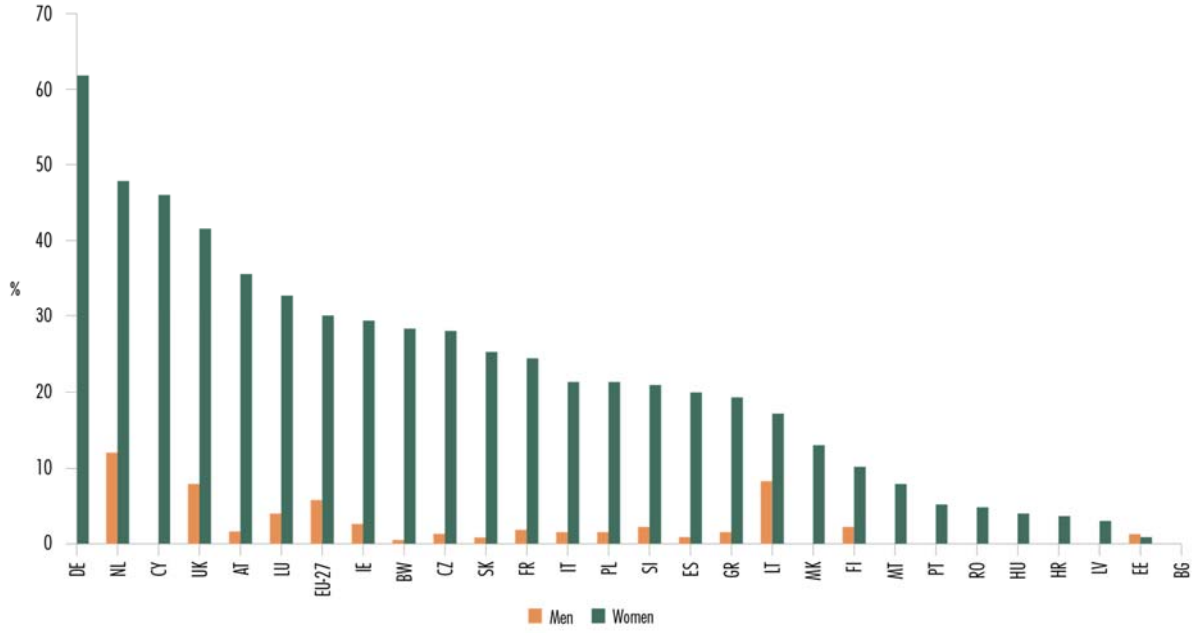
2.2. Parents labour force participation and work arrangements

Previous research has shown that labour market flexibility, for instance opportunities to work part-time and flexible hours, offer possibilities to combine parenthood and employment. As shown by Miani & Hoorens (2013), parents,[6] in particular mothers, often reduce working hours when their children are young. Figure 4 shows that there is a considerable gender gap in the proportion of mothers and fathers

[6] Miani & Hoorens (2013) refer to individuals aged 20 to 49, the primary age group for childbearing.

who have reduced their working hours to take care of a child. Women are much more likely to reduce their working hours for this reason, and the figures are particularly pronounced in Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and Austria.

Figure 4: Percentage of men and women aged 20 to 49 who have reduced their working hours to take care of the youngest child in the household (up to 8 years old)



SOURCE: Based on Miani & Hoorens (2013: 26).

Part-time working can aid the combination of employment and childcare responsibilities. According to estimates based on Labour Force Survey data, about 3.3 million Europeans aged between 15 and 34 have had to give up full-time work and switch to part-time working due to the lack of care facilities for children and older relatives (Eurofound 2013). The proportion of mothers working part-time is higher than the proportion of part-time female workers without children in about half of EU Member States. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and the UK, the majority of mothers work part-time. At the other end of the spectrum, in countries such as Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Romania, there is virtually no difference in the share of part-time workers among women with and without children. As shown by Miani & Hoorens (2013), the positive association between motherhood and working under 19 hours per week is particularly strong in Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands and the UK. For many mothers, returning part-time is the only way to go back to work, considering the capacity constraints in childcare and its high cost. In contrast, mothers in Slovenia, Croatia, Lithuania, Romania, Latvia, Portugal and Denmark are more likely to work full-time than their non-mother counterparts. Miani & Hoorens also show that full-time working increases with the age of the youngest child and that the propensity to work part-time is related to the number of children in the household. Similar findings arise from the European Working Conditions Survey, with mothers reporting that they prefer to reduce their working hours, in particular when their children are small (preschool age) (Eurofound 2012). This is consistent with research by Lewis et al. (2008) showing that mothers often

temporarily shift to part-time work, returning to full-time positions when their child is older. This is particularly the case in the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway.

Ruggeri & Bird (2013) have shown that single mothers are less likely than mothers with a partner to be employed full-time. The biggest difference in employment rates is for mothers of younger children, suggesting that having preschool children requiring the most intensive childcare arrangements is the greatest barrier to full-time employment.

EQLS 2011 data show that young mothers (those aged 18 to 29) who are currently employed work on average 34 hours per week. Just over a third of young working mothers (39 per cent) would like to reduce their working hours, whereas around 18 per cent would like to work more than they currently do. This indicates that a considerable proportion of young mothers is involuntarily engaged in part-time work. In addition, young working parents with childcare responsibilities are more likely than young workers without childcare responsibilities to feel that their job is insecure. This is particularly pronounced for young working mothers (Eurofound 2013). The EQLS data also provide some explanations of factors influencing work–life reconciliation by young people. Some 79 per cent of young parents have experienced difficulties in using childcare services. For around 60 per cent of young parents, the main obstacles in accessing childcare services were the high costs and availability. In addition, 40 per cent of young parents reported issues related to physical access (for instance distance) and 27 per cent issues related to the quality of care (Eurofound 2013).

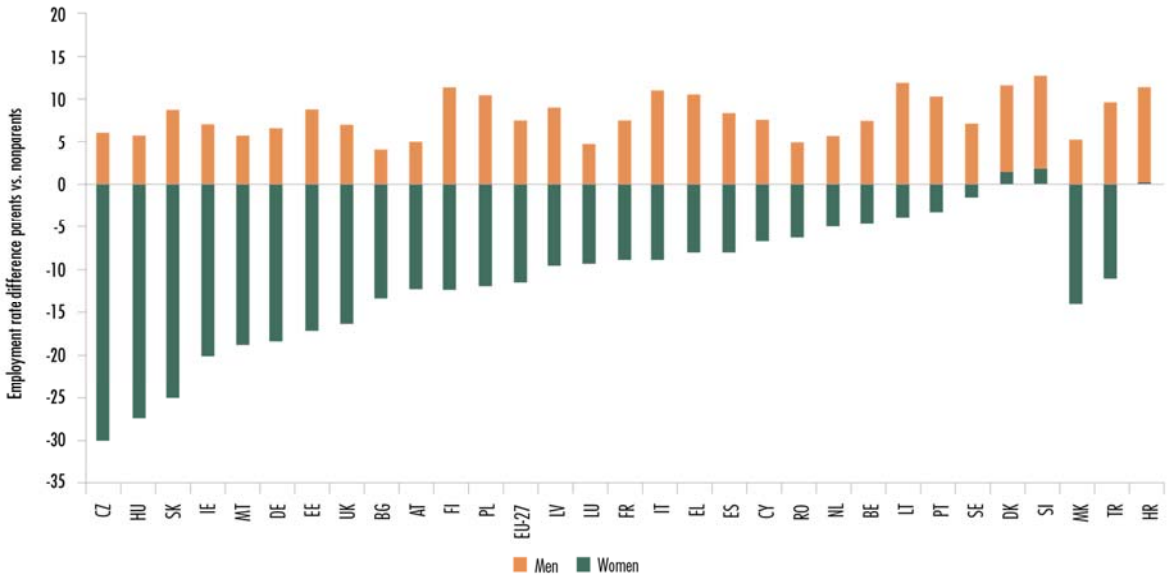
Flexibility in the workplace and opportunities to organising working hours around family responsibilities, such as arriving to work late or leaving work early, or working from home, can also facilitate reconciliation of work and parenthood. Miani & Hoorens show that 'parents tend to have slightly more flexibility in their working hours than non parents' (2013, 27) in most European Member States. Men report having more flexibility compared with women. Miani & Hoorens suggest that this may be linked to the different needs of men and women to arrange hours flexibly, with women having more demands for flexible working then men, and thus perceiving that their needs are not met.

Nevertheless, for many women with children, childcare responsibilities are still the main cause of labour market inactivity and low employment rates. Analysis of Eurostat data on inactivity rates by presence of young children[7] shows that 8.4 per cent of men and 21.1 per cent of women between 25 and 54 old were inactive in 2012. Such gender differences in the inactivity rate might be explained by the incompatibility of work and childcare, in particular for women.

Similarly, there are differences in the employment rate for men and women with and without children under 12. As summarised by Mills et al., there is 'a substantial gender divide of parenthood, with men with children under the age of 12 having higher rates of employment compared to those without children' (2013, 9–10). In contrast, 'motherhood is negatively correlated with employment' across Member States. The differences in employment between parents and non-parents remain persistent over time. Mills et al. conclude that childcare responsibilities are the main reason for differences in employment rates between men and women, with women more often not working in order to look after children.

[7] Information based on variable Inactive population - Main reason for not seeking employment (lfsa_igar).

Figure 5: Differences between employment rates of men and women aged 25 to 49 with and without children under 12, 2010



SOURCE: Based on Mills et al. (2013, 5).

Women are also more likely than men to have work interruptions[8] due to childcare responsibilities. Across the EU, more than 40 per cent of women compared with just 2 per cent of men have stopped working to look after their child for at least one month (Miani & Hoorens, 2013). This practice of mothers more often than fathers taking time off to look after children can be partly explained by the traditional view of women's labour force participation and care responsibilities. For instance, more than half of parents report traditional attitudes towards work and care in Germany, Hungary, Poland and Portugal. As argued in an OECD report, 'a partial explanation of these responses may be the shortage of formal childcare for very young children – which can reinforce parents' attitudes towards employment and care' (2012, 210).

3. Combining childcare provision in Europe

3.1. Combining different types of childcare provision?

Looking at the wide range of options for caring for children, Saraceno (2011) analysed how the overall childcare package is organised in each country and how much is left to families, and through them to the market. Her analysis shows that Member States have different approaches and levels of public funding to support coverage of young children's care needs, including formal childcare provision, leave arrangements and the level of financial compensation during leave (see Figure 6). She uses a concept of 'effective leave', first developed by Plantega & Siegel (2004), and later reviewed in Plantenga et al. (2009). Plantenga et al.'s definition of 'effective leave' referred to the minimum wage, and Saraceno has adapted it to represent the average wage. The measure of effective parental leave combines information on the length of leave

[8] 'Work interruptions' includes parental leave but excludes maternity and paternity leave.

with the level of compensation during leave time. By providing one measure of generosity of leave, it reduces cross-country complexity and allows for comparison between countries.

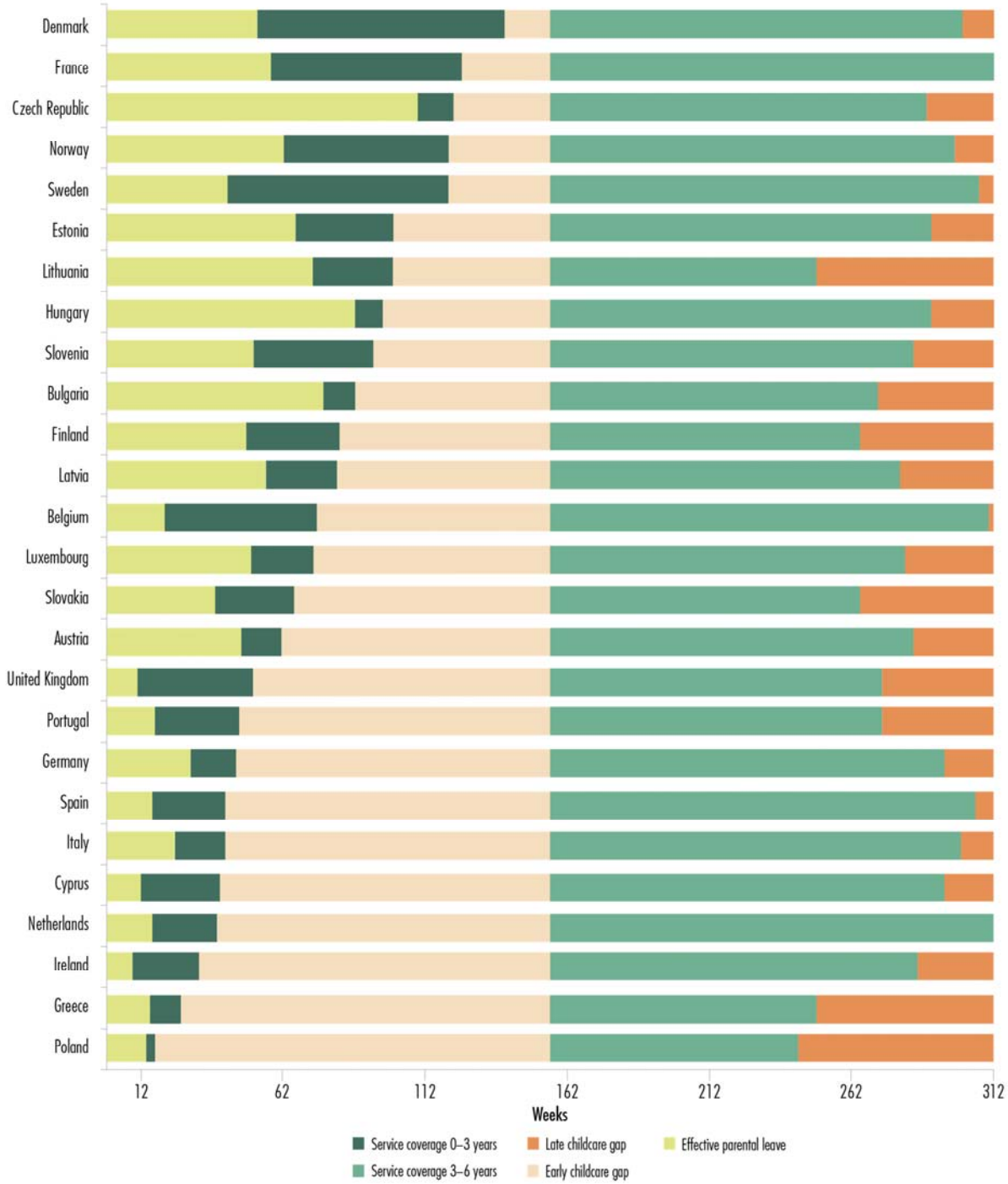
Nevertheless, there are two important aspects that have to be considered when applying the measure. First, the same levels of effective leave can be achieved by countries with completely different leave and compensation arrangements. Due to the way the measure is constructed, the effective leave level will be the same for countries with long but low-paid leave and for countries with short but well-paid leave. Understandably, the opportunities and incentives to take up leave in these countries would be different but this difference is blurred in the effective leave measure. Second, in some countries the compensation level varies during the leave period and often depends on the duration of leave. For instance, many countries offer an income-related compensation level in the first period after childbirth, followed by a flat rate payment or an unpaid period. By averaging the overall period the effective leave measure does not allow analysis of the specific incentives for parents to take leave (Keck & Saraceno 2011).

Saraceno's analysis reveals significant cross-country variations regarding overall length of leave, compensation level, and childcare coverage for the younger child group (0 to 3 years old), suggesting that 'this is an area where there is no consensus across countries' (2011, 80). On the other hand, the wide coverage for preschool children (aged 3 to compulsory school age) suggests that childcare services are seen as a normal experience for children and families. Saraceno notes that the greatest gap (or unmet demand) in childcare coverage, in particular for children aged 0 to 3, is in Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal, Spain, Poland (also true for older children of preschool age), and to a lesser degree the Netherlands. She concluded that in these countries mothers have fewer options and 'exclusive family/mother care is normative not because of explicit incentives, but because of a lack of publically financed alternatives' (2011, 82); the only option available for many working parents is reliance on family care, mostly by grandparents.

However, Saraceno also shows that the same level of childcare coverage can be obtained through diverse means, such as different combinations of paid leave arrangements and childcare services. Looking at the former Communist countries, she finds that they offer the longest effective leave among all Member States. She suggests that this 'may represent a reaction to negative experiences with childcare services in the past, long-working hours for parents, and a way of dealing with unemployment' (2011, 82). On the other hand, she noted a lack of incentives implicitly supporting fathers in these countries, possibly resulting from a strong gender division of responsibilities between mothers and fathers. She argues that it can, in turn, 'result in a long-term negative impact on mothers' chances in the labour market and on poverty risks for households and children' (2011, 82).

Saraceno's study also suggests that there is no linear link between care arrangements and parents' labour force participation. For instance, in Portugal mothers of young children mostly work full-time, despite short effective leave and scarce childcare services. This is possibly due to extended family members supporting working mothers. Similarly, a relatively high level of labour force participation, mostly full-time, among mothers of small children in Italy is also seen as a result of extended family care. In contrast, in the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway mothers mostly work part-time when their child is young.

Figure 6. Childcare coverage through 'effective leave' and publicly financed services, in working weeks, EU and Norway 2003–2007



Note: No available data for Malta and Romania.

SOURCE: Saraceno (2011), based on Multilinks (2009) and Keck et al. (2009).

In Figure 7, we have combined the broad range of factors and reconciliation measures that impact on parents' labour market outcomes and decisions about childcare for children aged 0 to 3 years. We note that various factors present obstacles to childcare and employment. For instance, the use of formal childcare services among children can be related to length of leave. Women, in particular those from lower socio-economic groups, tend to use leave arrangements when they are available (Saraceno 2011, 84). This

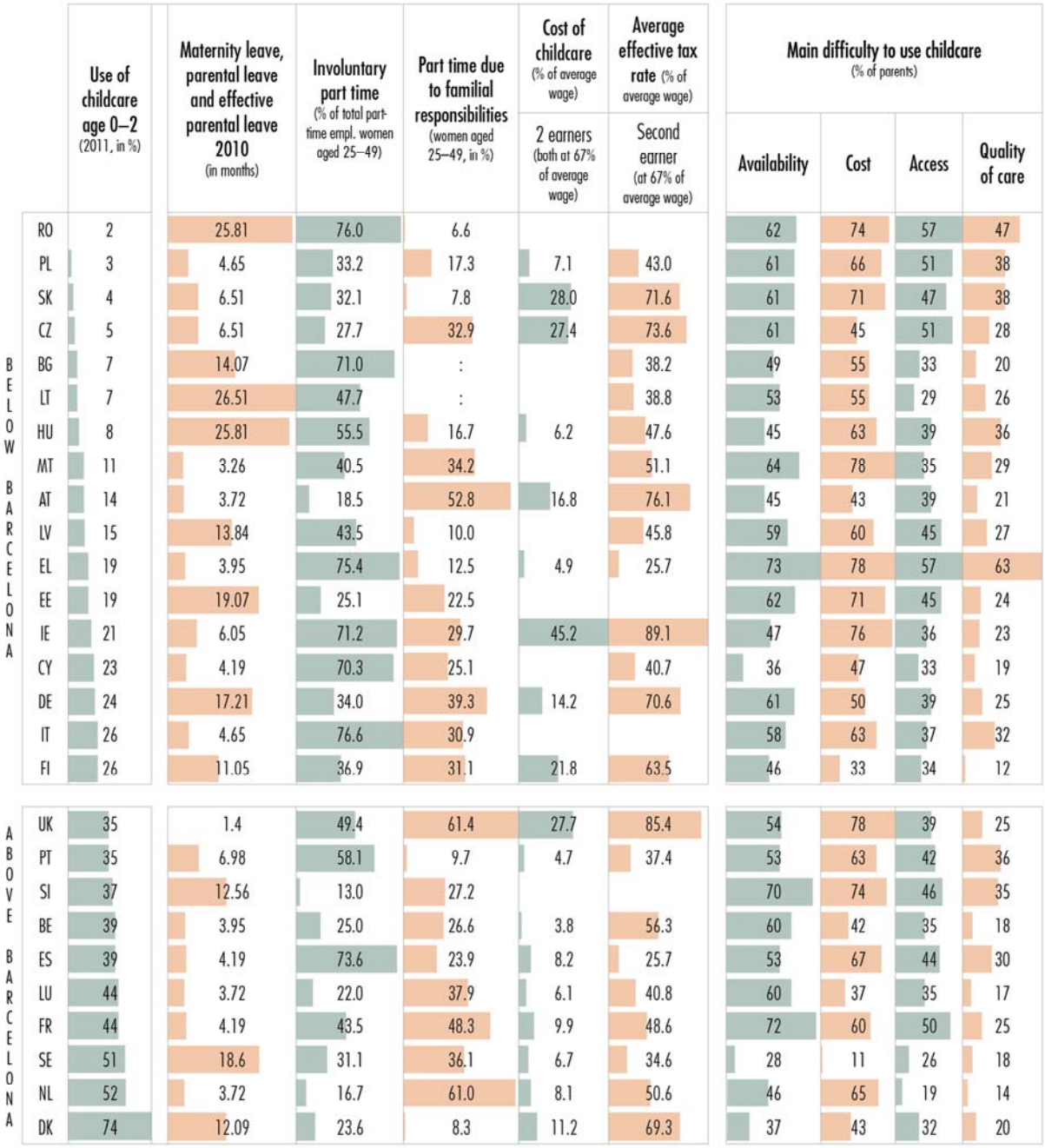
can keep them out of the labour market for long periods, weakening their future employment prospects (European Commission 2013b). For children, participation in formal childcare provision can have a positive impact, in particular on those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The cost of childcare is also an important factor for work-life reconciliation, particularly for low-income families. When the cost of childcare is too high, it may act as an inactivity trap since parents, especially mothers, can be better off not working and looking after their children themselves. For instance, in Ireland the cost of childcare seems to have a considerable impact on the use of childcare services by parents. Similarly, in Slovakia and Czech Republic the high cost of childcare seems to have had an impact on low level of use, with parents moving to part-time employment or leaving the labour market to meet their childcare needs. In contrast, still looking at the countries that have not yet reached the Barcelona targets, long leave periods appear to be a major disadvantage to the greater use of childcare services in Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Estonia, and to a lesser extent in Germany. High levels of female part-time employment can also be seen as a way to combine family and professional responsibilities in Germany and Austria.

The characteristics of childcare services, such as availability, access and quality of care are also important determinants of service use. Difficulties in accessing childcare related to inadequate opening hours seem to be of particular relevance for parents in Greece, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic. Issues related to quality of service are noted in particular in Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Italy.

Some of these factors are also relevant for childcare service use in countries that have reached the Barcelona target for children aged 0 to 3. For instance, in the UK and the Netherlands a large proportion of mothers move to part-time employment due to familial responsibilities. Parents in France are dissatisfied with opening hours of childcare facilities, whereas parents in Slovenia and Spain report issues related to the quality of care.

Figure 7. Use of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) related to context indicators



SOURCES: EU_SILC 2011; Fondazione Brodolini (maternity and parental leave); EU LFS (unvoluntary part-time and inactivity); OECD tax-benefit model (cost of childcare); Eurofound European Quality of Life Survey (self-declared obstacles). Referenced after European Commission (2013b).

Conclusion

Our research on childcare provision in Europe shows that there is a broad range of options that parents can choose from to cater for their family care needs. In some countries, there are dominant models of childcare, for instance that provided in formal settings in Scandinavian countries, or the long parental leave schemes in Central and Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, it seems that parents prefer flexibility of care options, and often combine various childcare instruments. The use of particular care

arrangements often depends on a child's age, labour market opportunities and the cultural and social norms relating to the role of women and childcare provision. Some parents prefer full-time care whereas for others part-time provision is sufficient. The example of the Netherlands shows that periods of part-time work when children are young can help with being economically active and managing childcare responsibilities. It also shows that full-time participation rates in formal childcare settings are not a prerequisite for high levels of female labour force participation. It is clear that one model of childcare will not suit all parents and that EU Member States cannot be overly prescriptive regarding particular types of childcare. It is essential that policies cater to the preferences of parents and the needs of children. At the same time, it is important that policies reflect best knowledge about child development and promote options that help all children achieve their full potential.

In order to meet the needs of the majority of parents, it is important that governments support a range of different childcare options, and provide opportunities for women to enter and remain in the labour market should they wish to do so. It is the responsibility of public policy to make sure that choice is really available for parents and that they, in particular mothers, are not excluded from the labour market or involuntarily work part-time due to the lack of formal childcare provision. It is also crucial that equal working conditions and opportunities for professional development and career progression are provided for both parents across sectors and occupations. This would ensure that those who are temporarily out of the labour market (for instance on childcare leave) or working part-time (voluntarily or involuntarily) are not disadvantaged compared to full-time workers without childcare responsibilities. As parents prefer flexibility in reconciliation, the state should ensure that all parents are provided with suitable childcare provision and supported in their labour force participation.

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